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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: TAIWAN'S REFERENDA

¶11. Summary: Taiwan's major Chinese-language dailies gave extensive reporting and editorial coverage on January 11 to the legislative elections which will be held island-wide on January 12. According to news reports, the DPP is aiming at winning 50 seats in the new 113-seat Legislature, but KMT Chairman Wu Poh-hsiung pledged to step down Thursday if the DPP won 50 or more seats in Saturday's elections. The pro-independence "Liberty Times" ran a banner headline on page eight that said "Ministry of Foreign Affairs Urges [the Taiwan People] to Cast Referendum Ballots Proactively so as to Protect Taiwan and Speak out against China."

¶12. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a "Liberty Times" editorial strongly criticized the Blue camp's attempt to boycott the referenda and urged the voters to cast referendum ballots in Saturday's elections. An editorial in the pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" also chimed in by saying that to boycott the referenda "is not only an insult to voters, but also harmful to the nations' effort to consolidate democracy." End summary.

A) "The Pan-Blue Camp's Attempt to Block Referenda Is an Anti-Democratic Act"

The pro-independence "Liberty Times" [circulation: 700,000] editorialized (1/11):

"... In short, the two referenda [initiated by the DPP] on 'recovering the ill-gotten [KMT] party assets' and on 'Taiwan's UN membership,' respectively, are essential to transitional justice [a term commonly used by the DPP to encompass all elements of Taiwan's transition from single-party state to democracy] and Taiwan's national status, so their importance is quite evident. If the Blue camp succeeds in using dirty tricks to boycott the referendum on recovering the ill-gotten [KMT] party assets tomorrow, then it likely bodes poorly for the UN referendum slated for March. Just as President Chen said, the referendum to recover the ill-gotten party assets will be the last chance for the Taiwan people to retrieve the assets stolen by the KMT. If the people miss this opportunity, the KMT will feel assured about its possession and sale of its party assets, with which it can engage in unjust competition with other political parties and maintain its enormous political influence. The UN referendum is aimed at expressing the Taiwan people's strong interest in participating in international affairs; should it pass, the international community will find it difficult to ignore the fact of Taiwan's existence, and will thus accept Taiwan's participation in international society. This is the reason why China has strongly mobilized the United States and the European Union, aided by the KMT from the inside, to seek to block the UN referendum. Thus, we must urge the voters to attach great importance to the referenda, pick up and cast the referendum ballots proactively, in order to support Taiwan becoming a complete country of justice. The simple act of picking and casting the [referendum] ballots will have extraordinary significance for Taiwan. ..."

B) "Rejecting the Tools of Democracy"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] editorialized (1/11):

".... It is not that surprising to hear calls from the KMT to boycott the referendums. After all, it was the Pan-Blue camp's actions that resulted in the 'bird cage' version of the Referendum Law, which resorts to technicalities to restrict the use of referendums, depriving Taiwanese of greater democratic power. But anyone who respects the country's democratic pioneers and feels a sense of responsibility in defending the country's hard-won democracy should not allow themselves to be intoxicated by the KMT's anti-democratic rhetoric. ....

"Taking part in a referendum is a privilege but also an obligation from which each citizen of a democracy should draw pride. The boycott proposal is not only an insult to voters, but also harmful to the nation's effort to consolidate democracy."

YOUNG